



Early Implementation of the Cornerstone High School Mentoring Program

Prepared for:
The New York City Mayor's Office
for Economic Opportunity and
the Department of Youth and
Community Development

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NYC Opportunity Response to Westat's Evaluation of the Early Implementation of the Cornerstone High School Mentoring Program

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Launched in 2012 as part of the NYC Young Men's Initiative (YMI), the Cornerstone Mentoring (now DYCD Mentoring) program provides group mentoring support to youth as they progress through key life and educational transitions. The program is administered by the New York City Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD), with funding from YMI and program implementation, performance management and evaluation support from the Mayor's Office for Economic Opportunity (NYC Opportunity).

The original Cornerstone Mentoring program model focused on middle school students and enhanced the services of Cornerstone community centersⁱ in New York City Housing Authority facilities. The Cornerstone Mentoring program connects volunteer mentors to groups of three to four youth for weekly group mentoring throughout the academic year. Youth participants and mentors engage in various project based activities, community service, academic and career support, and recreational and team-building activities, often based on mentees' needs and interests. Three evaluations of the program conducted between 2014 and 2016 by Policy Studies Associates, Inc. (PSA), a social policy research firm, found a correlation between hours of mentoring and improved school attendance for program participants, improved attitudes towards education, and confidence in their ability to succeed academically among other findings. These positive findings were a key consideration in the decision to expand the program to include high school youth in 2016. The expansion also allowed middle school youth to stay engaged rather than age out of the program.

To understand early implementation outcomes from the high school expansion of Cornerstone Mentoring, Westat and Metis Associates conducted a qualitative evaluation during the fall of 2017, the start of the second full year of the high school expansion. At the time the evaluation was conducted, the high school mentoring program was offered in 29 community centers located throughout the city, serving up to 360 high school youth. The evaluation describes early implementation of the programming, drawing upon interviews and focus groups with 60 mentees, 25 mentors, and 12 program coordinators or program staff and analysis of participant data.

Reinforcing some of the positive outcomes from earlier studies, this evaluation also finds that mentoring can help change young people's views on education and their career, improve relationships, and promote continued engagement in their communities. Specifically, the evaluation identifies a variety of benefits that participants and staff reported Cornerstone Mentoring provides to high school mentees, including:

- Increased engagement in school and a more serious focus on their professional futures and college attendance goals
- Improved relationships and emotional well-being, as well as enhanced teamwork, conflict-resolution, communication and leadership skills
- Greater community involvement through service activities, which have led to some mentees creating their own initiatives for continued community engagement



The evaluation also finds that focusing on mentees' academic growth and college and career readiness, recruiting mentors who can relate to mentees' experiences and flexible programming that offers mentees choice in planning program activities can help to drive program success.

Based on some of the promising findings highlighted above combined with a goal to provide comprehensive, coordinated services to youth, DYCD expanded the Cornerstone Mentoring program model to provide mentoring at additional after-school programs in the 2018-19 school year. While the overall number of program sites remains consistent at 62 sites serving up to 744 youth, DYCD is piloting group mentoring at some sites within the Beacon, Compass NYC, and Learn & Earn programs.

Through this and other initiatives, NYC Opportunity will continue to build evidence on the best practices and most effective strategies for providing meaningful mentoring experiences to NYC youth.

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ⁱ Cornerstones are community centers located in New York City Housing Authority public housing developments. Through Cornerstones, participants of all ages can engage in programming funded by DYCD. Typical youth programming includes sports, arts, and educational after-school services like tutoring or homework help.

Summary

This brief presents highlights from an evaluation of the Cornerstone Mentoring Program's high school expansion. The Cornerstone Mentoring Program provides a variety of mentoring supports to New York City youth as they progress through key life and educational transitions. Upon its initiation in 2012 as part of the Young Men's Initiative (YMI), the program served primarily middle school-age youth. In 2016, the program was expanded to include high school youth, and now enrolls participants in grades 5 through 12. The program is administered by the New York City Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD), with funding from YMI and support from the Mayor's Office for Economic Opportunity (NYC Opportunity).

The mentoring program operates within Cornerstone Community Centers, which are located in New York City Housing Authority housing developments throughout the city. The community centers offer a range of services and activities for youth and adults residing in the community, including education and training opportunities, intergenerational programs, social events, and recreational facilities. The centers are operated by community-based organizations under contract with DYCD. At the time the evaluation was conducted, the high school mentoring program was offered in 30 community centers located throughout the city (an additional 19 centers offered middle school mentoring only).

Westat and Metis Associates (the evaluation team) conducted the evaluation during the fall of 2017, at the beginning of the second full year of the high school expansion. The evaluation focused on describing the early implementation of the high school mentoring program, drawing upon interviews and focus groups with mentors, mentees, and program staff. These interviews and focus groups took place during in-person visits to 10 sites offering high school mentoring, which were chosen to include programs in different neighborhoods and programs with different

levels of staff experience and performance during the first year of implementation. During the visits, the evaluation team spoke with approximately 60 mentees, 25 mentors, and 12 mentoring program coordinators or other program staff. The evaluation team also interviewed key informants from city government agencies and a technical assistance provider that oversee or support the program and reviewed data on program participants. Questions addressed by the evaluation included:

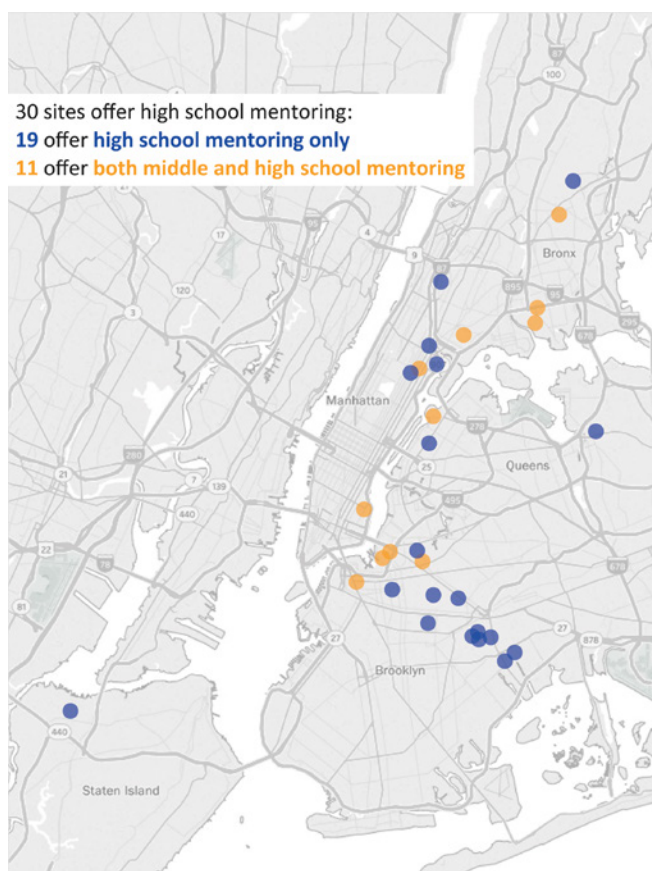
- What are the characteristics of high school mentoring participants?
- What is the composition of the mentor-mentee groups?
- What is the role of the program coordinator and any other staff in the program?
- What strategies are used to recruit and screen mentors, train mentors, retain mentors and mentees, and identify and engage mentees?
- In what activities do mentors and mentees engage? What resources are provided to support the program?
- What do mentees expect from the program? What do mentors expect to contribute?
- What do participants' personal experiences tell us about the impact of the program?
- What do mentors, mentees, and program staff identify as effective? What do they identify as having room for improvement?

Key findings from the evaluation are highlighted in the box on the next page.

About the Cornerstone High School Mentoring Program

The expansion of Cornerstone Mentoring to include high school youth began in 2016 with nine Cornerstone Mentoring sites that participated in a brief pilot (from April to June, 2016). The high school program grew to 29 sites in program year 2016–17, which was the first full year of implementation (from July 2016 to June 2017).¹ At the beginning of program year 2017–18, 30 sites offered high school mentoring (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Location of sites offering high school mentoring



¹ Six of the nine pilot programs continued into the first full year of implementation.

Key evaluation findings

- **Most sites have designed their programs to be flexible and offer mentees individualized attention and choice in setting program activities.** The evaluation also found that a large portion of mentoring activities focus on supporting mentees' academic growth.
- **Conversations between mentors and mentees are a valuable aspect of the program.** Mentors and mentees interact through group conversations focused on a topic as well as informal one-on-one conversations. Stakeholders said both planned and spontaneous conversations are a valuable way for mentees to express themselves and for mentors to learn about mentees' goals.
- **Mentors' interest in the program stemmed from experiences with their own mentors and the effect this had on their own personal trajectory.** This finding suggests that the program can promote success by identifying and recruiting mentors who share background and experiences with mentees.
- **Mentees reported a variety of benefits from the program.** These included academic help and support for school transitions, improved attitudes and relationships, improved emotional well-being, and increased community involvement.
- **The most effective recruitment strategy for mentees was word of mouth.** For example, program staff encouraged mentees to tell their friends about the program.
- **Some sites have faced challenges with mentee recruitment, while others have experienced too much demand.** Engaging with parents and retaining top mentors are other common challenges faced by the sites.
- **The program can be strengthened through strategies to enhance mentee and mentor participation.** Recruitment and retention challenges for mentees and mentors could be addressed through enhanced cross-site learning opportunities. Options to sustainably expand the program could be considered as well, including enhanced staffing resources.

Findings from a previous evaluation that showed positive results for middle school youth were a key consideration in the decision to expand the program to include high school youth. For example, the previous evaluation found that middle school youth who received mentoring had more positive perceptions about the importance of school and belief in their ability to succeed compared to youth who did not receive mentoring. The previous evaluation also found higher rates of participation in community center activities among youth who received mentoring, and higher levels of retention in the mentoring program compared to other after-school programs.² As representatives of NYC Opportunity and YMI explained, and the previous evaluation's findings suggested, expanding the program would allow middle school youth to stay engaged rather than age out of the program.

Program Design

Program goals. Five overarching goals guide the high school mentoring program: (1) Promote positive changes in youths' attitudes toward themselves, others, and their futures; (2) Assist youth in exploring college and careers; (3) Support school transitions and/or new school environments; (4) Help youth cultivate an ethic of service to their communities; and (5) Equip youth with leadership skills. In addition to these five formal goals, program staff indicated that they also seek to equip mentees with "the tools they need to be successful" and to bolster mentees' social-emotional development and well-being, including "getting [mentees] to understand their self-worth." Some staff also underscored the importance of introducing youth to new surroundings, including other neighborhoods in New York City.

Program model. The high school mentoring program model establishes some basic parameters for implementation while offering individual sites

flexibility to determine the kinds of mentoring activities that are offered. Mentoring is expected to occur weekly in a group setting, with one mentor assigned to three to four mentees. Weekly mentoring sessions last at minimum 90 minutes, and can incorporate various activities, including group discussions, sports activities, excursions, cultural events, arts and crafts, etc. Mentoring activities may be organized around a theme (e.g., "Exploring New York City") or in a less structured format. Mentoring activities are expected to take place during the community center's hours of operation, either during the school week or on weekends.

With high school kids, you can't escape the academic part of it.

— Mentoring Program Coordinator

Although the model for the high school mentoring program is similar to the middle school program, it is more strategically focused on college and career readiness. For example, high school mentoring activities might include academic support³ (e.g., tutoring), college visits, attending college fairs/workshops, life skills classes and workshops, and exposure to different jobs and careers.

Program Setting

The high school mentoring program operates through Cornerstone Community Centers, which are located in New York City Housing Authority developments throughout the city. The mentoring program is intended to be integrated within the larger community center, and individual mentoring programs draw upon the space and resources available in the center in which they are based, including both the staff who manage the center and its physical resources.

² Policy Studies Associates, 2014. Evaluation of the DYCD YMI Cornerstone Mentoring Program. Report to DYCD, YMI and NYC Opportunity (previously named the Center for Economic Opportunity).

³ Implementation of academic supports are not a requirement, but are seen by DYCD as a best practice for the high school mentoring program.

For example, community centers may offer space where mentoring groups can meet and spaces where mentoring activities can take place, including computer labs, arts spaces, and recreational facilities such as gyms and basketball courts. Youth who participate in the mentoring program are typically residents of the community and are often already going to the community center for other activities (e.g., summer camp, basketball, swimming, etc.). As noted above, at the beginning of program year 2017–18, high school mentoring was offered in 30 community centers.

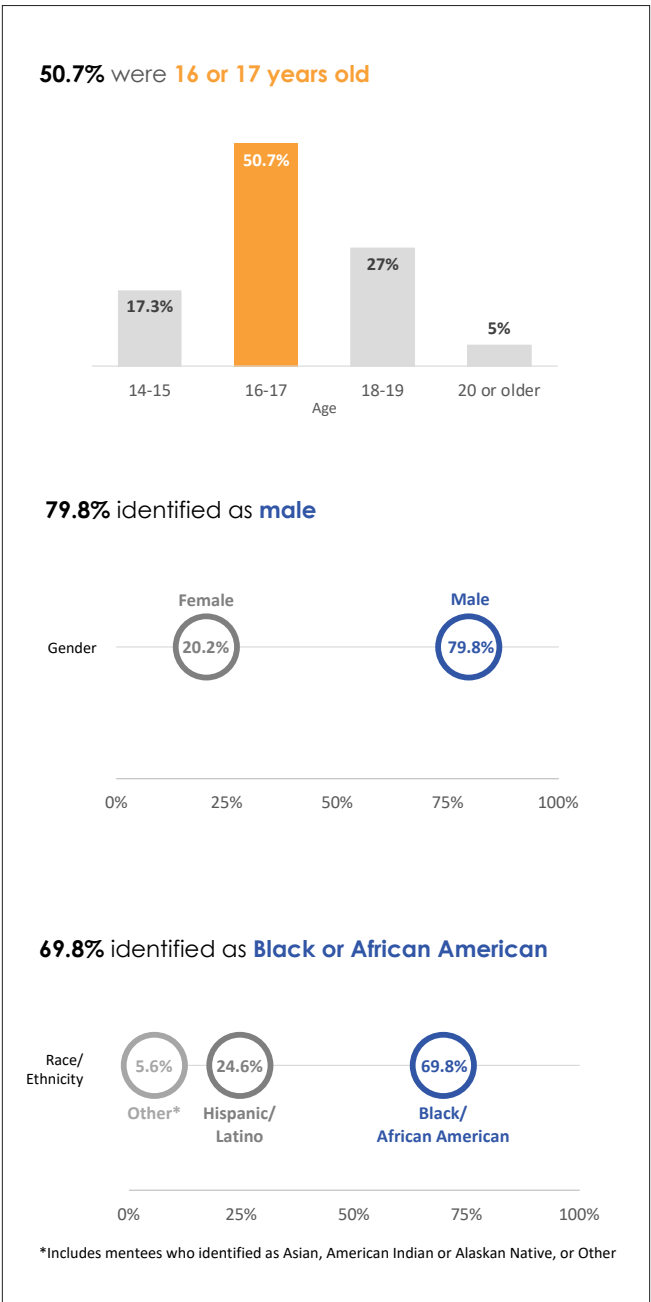
Target Population

Each high school mentoring program is required to enroll 12 mentee participants. The high school program specifically targets black and Latino males in grades 9–12, but sites may enroll some female mentees as well. In program year 2016–17, the high school mentoring program enrolled 341 participants, most of whom were between the ages of 16 and 17 (the average age was 17). Nearly 70 percent of participants identified as black or African American, while about 25 percent identified as Hispanic or Latino; and, as expected, a large majority (nearly 80 percent) of participants identified as male. Figure 2 summarizes the characteristics of the 341 participants.

Program Staffing

Mentoring program coordinator. Each mentoring program is overseen by a coordinator (or other experienced staff member from the organization contracted to manage the community center) who is responsible for management tasks including recruiting and screening mentors; identifying mentees; matching mentors and mentees; supervising the mentor-mentee relationship; planning and overseeing program activities; providing support to mentors (e.g., one-on-one meetings); and engaging parents and families.

Figure 2. Characteristics of high school mentoring participants in program year 2016–17 (n=341)



The role of the mentor is to be that responsible adult in the mentee's life that will work with them to move them to their next level of accomplishment.

— *Mentoring Program Coordinator*

Coordinators also participate in regular calls/check-ins with DYCD staff, report to DYCD on a monthly basis, and manage the program budget. Community-based organizations that manage the community center are asked to identify an existing employee to serve as coordinator for the mentoring program (the position is expected to be supported by the Cornerstone Community Center, rather than the mentoring program specifically). Representatives of these organizations said that they look for mentoring program coordinators who have a strong presence in the community and are able to build connections with parents, families and high school age youth. Coordinators are allowed to also serve as mentors outside of their regular work hours at the Cornerstone Community Center, and some choose to take on this additional role.

Mentors. The mentor role includes developing relationships with mentees, providing guidance and support, and aiming to be a consistent presence in the lives of mentees. Each mentoring program has autonomy in deciding what kinds of mentors they recruit. However, DYCD encourages the sites to recruit mentors who can commit to weekly sessions, are comfortable working in groups, have some understanding of youth development, and are mature and positive role models for the youth. The only requirement for the high school program is that the mentors be at least 21 years old. As a result, sites seek out mentors from various community settings and backgrounds, including educators from local colleges and universities, and community leaders and business owners, as well as leaders from local religious organizations, community boards, and teacher associations.

Support Provided to Site Staff and Mentors

Sites offering high school mentoring are supported through trainings and other resources provided by DYCD, Mentor New York (a technical assistance provider), and the community-based organizations that manage individual sites. DYCD requires coordinators, mentors and site staff to attend designated trainings and workshops offered by Mentor New York. Mentor New York has also offered Cornerstone staff access to additional events and trainings (e.g., its annual Mentoring Matters Conference), free of charge. Details on the types of training or other supports offered follow.

Coordinator Training. Mentor New York and DYCD offer coordinators training in areas such as program policies, administration, strength-based family approaches, mentor/mentee recruitment, and matching mentees to mentors. Coordinators may also participate in mentor-specific training if they serve in a mentor role.

Mentor Training. Mentor New York provides an initial training to prepare mentors for their role in the program. Mentors also shadow other mentors to learn mentoring skills. Additionally, throughout the year, DYCD offers trainings in areas such as leadership and social-emotional skills, conflict resolution, mandatory reporting, building healthy mentee-mentor relationships, mentee meet-up protocols, community building and social media policies. Coordinators also provide in-house trainings for mentors on a variety of topics, including how to create engaging activities and relate to the mentees.

Technical Assistance. If needed or requested, Mentor New York provides individualized support to sites, including on-site technical assistance. If sites need support related to program management, the DYCD program managers can provide assistance. In addition, coordinators participate in a monthly check-in with DYCD and Mentor New York, which is an opportunity to identify and discuss areas of need.

Evaluation Findings

Mentees' Reasons for Participating

Mentees want to learn about career and educational opportunities and get help working toward their own goals. Mentees said they hoped to work with mentors who could provide insight, guidance, and moral support.

Several mentees spoke about joining the program out of a desire for personal improvement, saying they hoped the program could help them “become a better person” and “make the right choices” in life. Mentees also wanted to discover different career opportunities and educational options, and expected that the program would help prepare them to reach their career and academic goals. As one mentee said, learning about college was an important reason for joining the program:

Some of us are in our senior year, so they said that we would be able to visit some colleges so that really helps us experience what a campus would be like and which one we would be interested in. So it would help with our college future. – Mentee

Mentors' Reasons for Volunteering

Mentors want to invest in youth and give back to their communities. Many mentors said they had a mentor or took part in a program like Cornerstone Mentoring during their youth that positively affected their lives. These earlier experiences were an important reason mentors decided to volunteer, with some saying they felt “an obligation” to offer similar opportunities to youth in their community.

Promising mentee recruitment practices

- **Use word of mouth.** Site staff said asking mentees to tell their friends about the program was an effective way to reach new mentees.
- **Raise awareness in the community.** Staff posted flyers in the community and met with local principals, coaches, and youth from other programs to inform them about Cornerstone Mentoring.
- **Reach out to youth through activities that interest them.** One coordinator connected with a group of youth who regularly came to the community center to play basketball, and used these interactions to bring them into the mentoring program.

I [had] a mentor when I was young, so I know what a positive impact that had on my life. I wanted to be there for somebody else.

— Mentor

Several mentors said they wanted to serve as a positive role model for youth, including being “somebody [mentees] can look up to as a young black man.” Mentors also said they wanted to help youth broaden their perspective and achieve their goals, including pursuing college. For example, one mentor shared, “I thought maybe I could impart my knowledge that I’ve gained from going away [to college] to a new generation and maybe inspire them to go away to college.”

Promising mentor recruitment practices

- **Draw on existing networks.** Program staff used their contacts at local colleges and academic fraternities, as well as friends and colleagues to recruit mentors.
- **Identify resources in the community and make a plan.** Mentor New York helps Cornerstone Mentoring sites identify potential sources of mentors in the community (such as businesses, organizations, and colleges) and develop a plan to recruit from these sources.
- **Highlight the opportunity to give back.** Mentors said that their own positive experiences with a mentoring or similar program in their youth drew them to volunteer to be a mentor.

Mentoring Activities

Most mentoring programs offer a flexible set of activities that are chosen based on mentees' interests. Most sites allowed mentees to choose activities for each session based on current needs or interests. For example, mentees sometimes arrive at the site in need of homework help, while other times mentees and mentors meet as a group to discuss issues that have arisen in their communities and discuss ways to improve the neighborhood. One site began the year by involving mentees in planning program activities. The mentees were provided with the program budget and asked to brainstorm a schedule of activities for the remainder of the year. As a mentor in this site said,

It was cool for them [to] actually get experience in planning their own program... seeing not just the things that were available to them, but what the potential could be. – Mentor

A large portion of activities center around preparing mentees for future academic success, particularly entrance into college. Across sites, mentors help mentees explore their college options and craft their plans for the future. At some sites, this process begins with a structured activity, such as drafting written

goals or creating vision boards. Most mentors reported helping their mentees research colleges and programs of study online, helping them to then work backwards in order to create a clear plan for gaining acceptance at their school of choice. Additionally, program staff reported taking their mentees on college visits or college fairs. To help mentees prepare for college, programs also provide academic support, including help with homework, preparing for SAT or Regents exams, and tutoring.

Some program activities focus on current and future employment opportunities for mentees. Mentors provide a sounding board for mentees to consider potential careers based on their current interests and strengths and help mentees research career paths and outline steps for achieving their goals. Some sites hold mock job interviews for mentees, talking through appropriate interview behavior and responses to common interview questions. As mentees seek summer employment, mentors help them locate job opportunities and complete applications.

At the same time, mentors and coordinators help mentees create realistic goals for themselves. As one mentor said, it is important for programs to help mentees think about different options for careers:

[Mentees] all have the idea [to go] to the NBA... I literally get the stats out for them. '500,000 kids play high school ball; 1,000 kids actually make it to the NCAA. 47 to 150 are actually going to make it into the NBA and only maybe 10 of them are actually going to have a good career.' So just knowing the numbers and how small that can be, you have to find a plan B. – Mentor

Service activities offer mentees a chance to engage with their community. All sites reported offering community service activities at least every three months and as frequently as twice per month. These activities have included walking for breast cancer, creating a haunted house for the community, painting a mural, cleaning up trash in the park, hosting a community barbeque, tutoring younger students, tending to the community garden, running a can drive, and feeding the homeless.

Mentee Story: Alonzo¹

Alonzo is 14 years old and in the tenth grade. He describes himself as humorous, fun, focused, an explorer and a basketball player. He first heard about Cornerstone Mentoring through his community center, and he decided to join last year because he wanted to become a better person, have a better future, and gain individual help from a mentor. The program meets his expectations, and Alonzo reports that the program has "...helped [him] build a better future, and it can help [him] be something great." As a mentee, he feels that he is responsible for being on time and focused as well as having positive energy and confidence. Regarding his mentor, Alonzo said, "It's good to have somebody there that I can relate to and maybe change my future." His mentor steers him toward achieving his goals (which include going to the NBA, or "Plan B," becoming an engineer, mechanic, or accountant) by teaching him to stay focused and supporting him outside of the program. For example, his mentor brought him to a preparatory school fair, and Alonzo is now in communication with some of these schools as a result. Alonzo feels that he has gained public and professional speaking skills, as well as the skills and confidence to become a leader, all of which he feels that he can apply in improving his future. He expects that social distractions in his neighborhood will be an obstacle in accomplishing his goals, but his mentor has taught him to "never give up." Cornerstone Mentoring has brought new ideas and experiences into his life, and he feels that having guest speakers come to meet with his group makes him and his peers feel important and confident. Alonzo hopes that the program will be expanded so that he can continue to learn new things and more of his peers can participate.

¹ Mentee names are pseudonyms to protect confidentiality.

Mentees were sometimes hesitant to participate in community service at first, but often came to see the value of engaging with the community. For example, mentees at one site served on a youth council for the community center, which allow elected youth in the community to provide input into community issues and activities. One mentee in this site said that this experience had offered a unique leadership experience:

It kind of gives you a voice... It gives you something to stand for I guess if you ever want to help the community but felt that you couldn't do it on your own. You can do it with other people and still do what you believe in. – Mentee

Mentees enjoy a range of on-site activities with their mentors, during which mentees and mentors get to know each other better. Common recreational activities have included cooking lessons, games, exercising, guest speakers, and workshops. Two sites reported that mentees spend a portion of each session journaling, and several sites use role-playing activities to help mentees understand other perspectives. Team-building activities are also routinely implemented in different formats across program sites. For example, one site created an egg survival project in which groups were given limited materials to build a structure that would protect their egg from cracking.

Many mentees' favorite part of Cornerstone Mentoring is group trips, which allow them the chance to bond with each other and with their mentors. In addition to college tours, mentees have had the chance to go to arcades, cinemas, amusement parks, obstacle courses, motivational speaker series, museums, sporting events, laser tag, rollerblading, bowling, and concerts. Many sites use these trips to incentivize attendance at weekly session. For example, at one site only participants who attend 80 percent of weekly sessions are allowed to go on trips.

A representative of the city's Young Men's Initiative said that this kind of incentive strategy is an intentional effort to engage high school students, who place high value on such experiences.

Mentee-Mentor Relationships

Mentoring program coordinators use various approaches to match mentees to mentors. Some programs match mentees with mentors who are equipped to assist them in specific areas of growth. Other programs seek to match mentors and mentees based on shared experiences, while others match based on a mentor's background or skills (e.g., working with a particular age group or with youth who have behavioral challenges).

Most program coordinators develop matches after the mentees and mentors have had a chance to get to know one another, allowing them to mingle for the first month or so of the program and observing whether mentees naturally gravitate to any of the mentors, which they often do.

Mentors who can relate to mentees' own experiences promote strong mentor-mentee relationships. In focus groups, mentees expressed that they are able to connect well with their mentors because they share similar upbringings. As one mentee said, "Everything we're going through now, they've been through so they can give us advice on how to handle it." Mutual trust and respect are also critical to the development of strong mentee-mentor relationships. Mentees give respect to mentors whom they believe respect them, and are more comfortable opening up to mentors that they respect. Further, mentees reported that one of the best parts of Cornerstone Mentoring is that they don't feel judged. As one mentee explained:

It's like a no judgment zone here. You say what you have to say, and [the mentors] help you to be a better person. If you made a mistake, they're going to show you a better way, an alternate path to get to a place where you want to be. – Mentee

Mentee Story: Caleb

Caleb is an athletic, intelligent, respectful and fun-loving 15-year-old tenth grader. He loves basketball and art, including any opportunities to build and create. He has been a member of Cornerstone Mentoring for one year, since its inception at the local community center, where he actively participates in other teen activities. He joined the program with the expectation that he would learn to become more responsible and a mentor to others. He feels that when he comes to the program, he is responsible for being timely and showing respect, calmness, positive energy, and maturity. He feels that the program's group setting allows for him to learn different perspectives from his mentors and fellow mentees, and he has enjoyed the mentor-mentee group trips to Manhattan museums and Brooklyn's Barclays Center. Caleb said, "I feel very confident, now that I have my mentor," and he reported that his mentor is the best part of Cornerstone Mentoring. Caleb's mentor supports him through teaching him the importance of getting to school on time and being a positive influence on his younger family members. As a result of spending time with his mentor, Caleb now sets an alarm to wake up on time for school and pays less attention to his phone when he is spending time with family. His goals for the future are to play college basketball and live on a college campus. He expects challenges in reaching these goals, but in response to this, he explained, "...my mentor told me that every success comes with a fail, so even though there's obstacles, [it doesn't] mean you just stop—just try to overcome it. Just overcome it."

Conversations between mentees and mentors—whether planned or spontaneous—are one of the most valuable aspects of the program. Topics for discussion during mentoring sessions are picked by coordinators, mentors, and sometimes by mentees.

Topics have included bullying, gun violence, politics, and personal goals, among others. In addition to group discussions, mentees also value the individual

conversations they have with their mentors. As one mentee said, “Just talking about your personal life, like some things you don’t want to disclose to your parents, you start building that trust. You start to feel comfortable.” Another mentee shared a similar experience, saying that personal conversations with his mentor were the best part of the program:

My favorite thing is when we just get to have a one-on-one conversation about how we’re feeling and how we can express anything throughout the day. And [mentors] give us a way to let out our frustration. Not on them, but channel it in a different way.
– Mentee

Perceived Program Benefits

College and career supports. Through their participation in the high school mentoring program, many mentees reported becoming more engaged in school and more seriously focused on their professional futures, including the possibility of attending college. Reflecting on the relationship with his mentor, one mentee said “[mentors] help us build our resume, they help us get into a college that we actually want to go to.” Mentors said that, over time, they see mentees’ goals shift from no plans for college or community college to plans for university enrollment. As one mentor said, “Some [mentees] don’t think [college] is an option for them. Not that they don’t want to, it’s just that they don’t think it’s possible. Now we’re giving these kids the opportunity to think about their futures.”

School transitions. Mentors discussed helping mentees make the transition from middle to high school, including understanding how the expectations for middle school and high school differ. Some mentors also noted that they check in with their 9th grade mentees to ensure the transition is going smoothly, including how they like their new school and whether they have met any new friends. For mentees who will be transitioning into college, mentors provide guidance on establishing healthy social groups, choosing classes needed for high school graduation, and goal planning.

As one mentor explained, they might provide guidance on “who to hang out with and what kind of classes [they are] actually going to need to graduate [or] what kind of Regents they should be taking; what to focus on basically and how to, from there, build their career.”

Improved attitudes. Mentors discussed seeing their mentees build a stronger sense of belonging, pride, and responsibility, especially when they feel that their voices are heard and taken into account. Mentees also discussed improvement in the ways in which they treat others and respond to stressful or frustrating situations. One mentee highlighted some of the ways he felt he had changed as a result of participating in Cornerstone Mentoring:

...I feel like I’ve changed more as a person because, even when I go to school, the way I carry myself, I’m not very loud, I do my work a lot... [I] pay attention to the teacher and I participate a lot more because I’m more open. Before I used to just sit in back of class and talk, but now, I sit in the back of class in the corner, raise my hand, answer every question, and my grades went up... – Mentee

Improved relationships. Mentees discussed how Cornerstone Mentoring has helped develop teamwork, conflict-resolution, and socialization skills. Mentees learn to interact with peers who do not look or act like them, and are more expressive and engaged in the program, in school, and at home. Mentees also reported better cooperation and communication with their peers and family members. As one mentee said, “If you give respect, you’ll get respect right back. And growing up as a young man, it’s important to learn stuff like this.”

Improved emotional well-being. For many of the mentees, Cornerstone Mentoring is a place—perhaps the only place—where they are encouraged to talk about what they are feeling. The program serves as a safe space for young people who may be feeling alone, and mentors make themselves available to mentees who need to talk. Mentors also teach the mentees how to respond to negative situations in healthier ways.

One mentor explained, “I’ve seen growth from certain individuals who would have reacted [negatively] had they not had somebody to guide them or give them the steps to take to just chill and think for a second... I think the mentoring definitely builds them up and allows them to see what it is, and approach the problem, and work through it with them. That builds self-confidence as a person.” Accordingly, mentees reported that when they come to program sites, they feel better, happier, and safer.

Greater community involvement. Mentees often reported that they initially joined the mentoring program because they wanted to better their communities. Through the program, mentees have participated in a variety of community service activities, including painting and cleaning up community parks and gardens, organizing canned food collections and coat drives, and setting up an obesity and diabetes information stand at a health fair. At one site, mentees decided to feed the homeless and hungry in their community and have created their own initiative for continuing this work. The youth are also more involved in trying to solve problems in their neighborhoods. For example, some mentees attend community meetings with the New York Police Department, visit police precincts, and even advocate for “safe haven” blocks in which police cars patrol routes toward the subway so that community members can travel safely.

Increased leadership skills. Some mentees expected to gain leadership skills as participants in the mentoring program. For one mentee in particular, developing leadership skills was the most important takeaway from the program. He learned the following: “Try not to follow when you see that nobody is stepping up to the plate, don’t be scared, and do and say what you have to say, but don’t come off as disrespectful. Find a way that you can come politely.” Mentees reported applying leadership skills in a variety of ways, including leading during a group setting, appropriately expressing what one means to say, holding peers accountable, embracing their communities, planning their own trips, and serving as role models for younger children both in and out of school.

Mentee Story: Neil

Neil is 18 years old, a senior in high school and a fifth-year participant in Cornerstone Mentoring, having also participated while in middle school. He describes himself as quiet, hardworking and always practicing basketball skills to achieve his dream of playing college basketball. Neil heard about the program from a friend, and when asked why he was interested in joining, he said, “I wanted to join... because I felt like [the program] could build me to accomplish my goals in life. I could start something new in myself.” He expected the program to help him reach his college goals and become a better person. Neil feels that his responsibilities as a mentee include exemplifying leadership skills and teaching these skills to his peers. He believes that the mentor-led team building exercises improve his own and his peers’ social, communication and problem-solving skills. When describing how comfortable he feels with his mentor, Neil reported, “on a scale of one to 10, a 10.” Neil feels that his mentor pushes him to overcome negativity, and he described a particularly tough situation in which he felt supported by his mentor: “One time, when my mom was going to the hospital a lot, I went to my coach and me, him, and a few of the other coaches all prayed. They sat and they talked to me and they told me that they are there for me if I need any help.”

Through mentors’ guidance, Neil feels that he has matured, become more focused on schoolwork, and strengthened his basketball skills. He explained, “There’s a time and place for foolery. There’s a time and place to be serious. Being here helped me organize that.” Off the basketball court, he plans to use these skills to conduct himself more appropriately, both socially and professionally. On the court, he plans to continue training through Cornerstone Mentoring until he reaches a college basketball team, and once graduated, he will continue to visit the program and act as a mentor for the younger students. Neil feels that the program is “its own community... It’s just helpful people all around.”

Challenges and Recommendations

Implementation Challenges

Mentee recruitment. Mentoring program coordinators in several sites reported that a major implementation challenge is getting youth through the door to participate in the program. One reason given for this difficulty was that high school students have greater control over their time than do middle school students, and thus may have competing interests or priorities (e.g., social activities, work or responsibilities at home). As a result, program staff and DYCD representatives have worked to figure out what draws in high school youth and what keeps them engaged, such as offering a range of trips and allowing mentees to have a voice in choosing program activities.

Conversely, other sites have experienced more demand for the program than can be accommodated. These sites face the challenge of turning youth away from the mentoring program or putting them on a waiting list. In these situations, mentoring program coordinators are interested in program expansion, but only if adequate resources are available to do so. Because the program is designed to be community-based and mentee recruitment is handled locally, sending potential mentees to other sites was described as not feasible.

Mentor recruitment. Barriers to recruiting or retaining mentors reported by program staff included:

- **Time commitment.** Potential mentors may be hesitant to make a weekly, 10-month commitment to the program, especially if they are balancing other obligations such as work or school. These competing obligations made it challenging to retain volunteer mentors, leading some staff to suggest adding a stipend for mentor service.
- **Shortage of potential mentors within the community.** Some sites found they needed to look outside their immediate community to find mentors, including through recruitment in other neighborhoods or in colleges in other areas of the city.
- **Site location or safety concerns.** Some of the community centers are located in isolated neighborhoods and are difficult for mentors to get to if they do not live or work in the community. Additionally, some program staff cited safety concerns in their communities (e.g., gangs) that may deter mentors from outside the community from volunteering.

Parent engagement. Engaging parents was cited as a challenge at several sites. Specifically, program staff indicated that it can be difficult to engage parents of high school youth because older youth are more independent and their parents are less hands-on, making parents less likely to attend meetings or program events. Program staff believe greater parent engagement would allow mentors to work alongside families to benefit the mentees. Sites have worked to engage parents in several ways, including inviting parents to participate in orientation sessions, field trips, and year-end celebrations.

Supporting mentees with complex emotional challenges. While the program improves mentees' confidence and feelings of belonging, many of the youth still face emotionally challenging situations, and Cornerstone Mentoring staff require additional training to help mentees manage these situations. Coordinators and mentors reported that they would benefit from learning how to help mentees in times of mental anguish or diminished well-being.

Resource limitations. Representatives of organizations that manage community centers said the funding sites that receive for Cornerstone Mentoring does not adequately support the role of the mentoring program coordinator, with some suggesting that the program support a full-time coordinator in each site. As one representative said, “I think the scope of what is required from [the coordinator] and what is required to have a successful program is hard to do based on the funding.”

Recommendations for Strengthening the Mentoring Program

Develop strategies for increasing mentee enrollment.

For sites in which enrollment is either too low or has potential for expansion, the Cornerstone Mentoring Program should strategize ways to best help sites thrive. Stakeholder groups described word of mouth recruitment, particularly from current mentees, as the most effective way to bring new mentees into the program. Coordinators who have successfully leveraged word of mouth strategies could also serve as a resource to sites struggling to recruit. For example, one mentoring coordinator interviewed for the evaluation offers other types of programming at the community center and makes a point to tell youth in the other programs about Cornerstone Mentoring. It is also noteworthy that mentees viewed certain activities, such as group trips, as a highlight of the program, so the program could consider emphasizing these types of activities during outreach to potential mentees.

Strategically focus cross-site collaboration opportunities on implementation challenges and best practices to promote cross-site learning. The program currently offers sites opportunities to connect with one another on a quarterly basis. This presents an opportunity to address sites’ challenge areas and to share promising practices. For example, program sites experiencing under-enrollment or low levels of engagement could be encouraged to connect with sites that are doing well in these areas.

Consider ways to sustainably expand the program.

Cornerstone Mentoring sites with waiting lists should be invited by DYCD leadership to recommend feasible ways to include more mentees without burdening the capacities of current mentors and coordinators. For example, sites might explore whether additional resources are available within the community center (e.g., additional staff to help coordinate mentoring activities). Program leaders at DYCD or Mentor New York could also look into other youth development programs in the city with similar challenges to identify potential solutions for oversubscription. Ultimately, however, the most effective expansion strategy may be through increased investment, including supporting a full-time program coordinator at each site. Findings from this evaluation indicate that the program provides life-changing benefits for many participants, suggesting that investing additional resources would be justified.